Teaching about *Reframing* with Films and Videos

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Reframing – exploring a situation from multiple perspectives – has become an increasingly popular teaching focus in organizational and management education (e.g., Bolman and Deal, 1984 and 1991; Frost et.al., 1991; Morgan, 1986; Quinn, 1988). Reframing, however, is a difficult concept for many students to grasp. Students often struggle to understand how and why one should shift perspectives on a single event. This is especially true for students who are concrete thinkers or who for developmental reasons view the study of organizations as a search for "the one right answer" (Gallos, 1989, 1992). Reframing demands a tolerance for ambiguity, an appreciation of the social construction of reality, and skills in relative thinking -- developmentally sophisticated capacities.

For these reasons, instructors can not assume that students will understand or be able to work well with the concept of reframing from reading a book on the topic or hearing orations on its relevance. Instructors, searching for productive strategies to teach the practice of reframing, may want to incorporate into their course designs opportunities for students to see examples of reframing, examine the social processes that make reframing difficult, and identify for themselves its importance for managerial effectiveness. Popular films and training videos offer one way of working with these issues and preparing students to become artful reframers.

Instructors, for example, can begin a foray into exploring multiple perspectives with an illustration of reframing in action. This provides students with both a general feel for the reframing process and a tangible example of shifting perspectives. *The Karate Kid* and *Dead Poets Society* are useful for this purpose. The best example from *The Karate Kid* is the scene where Mr. Miyagi shows Daniel how his house painting, deck sanding, and car waxing are not simply household tasks but karate training. Miyagi helps Daniel reframe days of hard work from "slave labor" to sophisticated preparation for a highly competitive karate championship.

Options from *Dead Poets Society* include the scene where Keating's students march around an outside courtyard, engaged in an experiential activity about conformity. Keating asks the students to rethink the meaning of their "walking around:" he invites them to reframe the event from random marching to an opportunity for learning about the power of social forces on their own behavior. Alternatively, there are multiple examples of Keating's unorthodox classroom behavior that require his students to reframe Keating's actions from simple eccentricity to creative challenges for powerful learning. Keating's whistling entrance to the classroom and his quick exit on day one of his course, his decision to hold the first class meeting in the hallway, his request that students rip out a passage from their texts to free their own interpretative powers, and his request that

students come and stand on his desk to symbolize seeing the world from a different perspective -- a perfect invitation to reframing -- are all scenes that lead to good discussion about reactions to norm violations or unmet expectations, the human tendency to dismiss the value of the unexpected, and the need to avoid quick evaluations, remain flexible, and dig deeply in understanding the meaning of human behavior in organizations.

The Karate Kid and *Dead Poets Society* are enjoyable vehicles for students to work with the idea of stretching the ways in which they make sense out of their worlds, and to begin exploring why this stretching is critical for personal and professional effectiveness. The educational themes in the films also lend themselves to explorations of the connections between reframing and organizational learning (Argyris and Schon, 1978) and offer opportunities for students in rethink the meaning of education and the role of student and instructor in the management classroom -- topics that provide an entry into discussion of the role of reframing in the course and its implications for course content, structure and activities.

As an alternative, instructors can introduce reframing with a humorous example by combining a showing of any version of the "Three Little Pigs" with Jon Scieszka's book, The True Story of the Three Little Pigs by A. Wolf. The book is a well-written and witty retelling of what "really" happened on that fateful day to those three little pigs from the perspective of the big bad wolf. The combination film and children's book works well with undergraduates as a wonderful twist on a story that students know well. If framed correctly, both can be used as a delightful example with other student audiences as well.

Once students have a general idea about reframing, instructors may want to move on to explorations of psychological processes that influence reframing. They can use Kurosawa's classic, *Rashomon,* to examine this set of issues. The film, where four witnesses tell four different accounts of a murder and rape, enables students to see individuals framing the same event in markedly different ways. The film also lends itself to discussion about the complex motives of the four story tellers and the implications for their tales. This in turn can lead to powerful explorations about personal interpretations of "truth," individual theory building tendencies, and acknowledgement of the need for multiple perspectives to broaden understanding of what's *really* going on in any situation.

The film, *Rashomon,* however, is not suitable for every student audience. It is a complex film. It is slow-moving, and in black-and-white with Japanese subtitles. For younger or less sophisticated audiences or when time to set up and thoroughly process a film is limited, the classic training film, Perception*: The Tragedy of the Friendly Breakfast* [available from Salenger Educational Media, 1635 12th Street, Santa Monica, CA 90404] might serve better. The film takes a humorous look at issues similar to those in *Rashomon* and offers three eyewitness accounts of what's "really" going on when a friendly meal is interrupted by gunshots. It offers opportunities to explore how perception influences personal interpretations

of events, and reciprocally how individual beliefs influence what we see. The film is a good entry into discussion about the human tendency to form private theories that can remain consistent over time and serve as the foundation for one's dominant frame or perspective on the world.

An alternative is to combine *Perception: The Tragedy of the Friendly Breakfast* with *Rashomon* or the movie *Hope and Glory* to deepen discussions about individual meaning-making processes. *Hope and Glory* is World War II as seen through the eyes of a young boy. Like *Rashomon, the* film is ideal for discussions about individual interpretations of social events and the possible motivations for constructing personal frames. *Hope and Glory* is an engaging film for all audiences and is less complex than *Rashomon*, although it lacks the explicit contrasts of four different accounts of the same event.

Students who understand the concept of individual frames and meaning making processes are ready to explore the social implications of individual perspectives. Malle's *Dinner with Andre* is one way to examine these concerns. The film chronicles conversations between two friends who have different world views and assumptions about love, death, art, and the quest for self-fulfillment. Exploring the depth of the differences, the possible reasons for them, and their implications for the men's friendship leads to discussion of the power and social consequences of contrasting frames.

Additional films possibilities to use here include *Rude Awakening* where two hippies return to New York City after a twenty years hiatus in a Central American commune only to learn that people no longer behave there as they did in the 1960's or *Bananas* where Woody Allen portrays a New Yorker turned Central American revolutionary. Both films are humorous portrayals of folks "coming from a different place." They illustrate well the social construction of reality and the interpersonal implications of frame differences. Each lends itself to rich discussion of the conflict and confusion that can arise when frames collide, the need to recognize one's own perspective and biases, the power of culture and of socialization processes to influence individual interpretations of events, the intrapersonal blinders that can further complicate self-reflection, and the ways that students can work to expand their perspectives on the world.

Alternatively, instructors in business courses may want to tie their work on reframing directly into the realities of managerial life. One way to do this is to use the Fred Henderson and Renn Zaphiropoulos cases and videotape. The videotape [available from HBS Case Services, Harvard Business School, Soldier's Field Road, Boston, MA 02163] shows a day in the work life of both men. The film can be used alone or as a supplement to discussion of the case materials. Combining the Fred and Renn cases with the videotape is powerful for audiences of all ages since students often have different reactions to the men when they read about them and when they see them in action. Exploring these different responses allows students to

dig into their own private theories and preconceptions and to personalize their learnings about frame blinders and biases.

As students watch the videotape, instructors can ask them to search for each man's personal theory of good management. Used together, the Fred and Renn videotapes provide an opportunity for students to explore two successful men with very diverse views of the managerial world and of good management. Discussion of each man's perspective, how it translate into action, and the reasons for the men's differences challenge students who struggle to discern what's right, best, or essential for good management. It leads well into acknowledging the importance of recognizing one's own frame and stepping out of that frame to see the world from another's perspective. "It's Not Lonely Upstairs: An Interview with Renn Zaphiropoulos," *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 1980, reprint #80612, is a useful supplementary reading with these videotapes.

Finally, once students grasp a basic understanding of the reframing process, instructors may want to work with them to identify and build skills essential for reframing. One option is to provide opportunities for students to stretch their abilities to move outside their own dominant frame. Instructors, for example, can choose a scene from a popular film that is filled with possibilities for multiple interpretations -- where there are many possible accounts for what's *really* going on here. Instructors can ask students to list all possible explanations for the event then work in small groups to sort through their lists, come up with their best guess of what's "really going on here," and provide a rationale for their choice(s). This activity surfaces contrasting frames, illustrates how differently people view events, and reminds students how much personal interpretation and "good hunches" play in defining social situations.

A number of film excerpts work well in this activity. Those in a management context include: (1) the first meeting between Tess and her new boss in *Working Girl;* (2) the negotiation scene near the end of the same film where the boss bursts into the room to wrestle power away from Tess; (3) Gordon Gecko's initial meeting with Buddy in *Wall Street*; (4) the meeting between the young Japanese tax collector and the owners of a mom-and-pop store in *A Taxing Woman*; (5) Joe Clark's first meeting with his high school staff in *Lean on Me*; and (6) the opening scene in *Ikiru* where a group of women travel through the government bureaucracy in search of help to clean-up a swampy neighborhood lot. Other film possibilities include: (1) the conversation in the barber shop between the new basketball coach and the townspeople in *Hoosiers*; (2) the 1969 fourth of July parade in *Born on the Fourth of July*; (3) the opening five minutes from the movie *Patton*; and (4) the family-splintering argument between two brothers over the cutting of the Thanksgiving turkey in *Avalon*.

Films and videos can be very powerful vehicles for teaching students conceptual flexibility and the ability to shift perspectives. Many classic films

contain examples of divergent interpretations of the same event, as well as scenes that can be understood from a variety of perspectives. This paper contains a number of excellent film options[1]. Creative instructors will easily generate more of their own as they search for productive strategies to teach the art and practice of reframing.

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[1] Additional film suggestions and options for course and class designs that focus on reframing events from multiple perspectives can be found in Gallos (1991).

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